

## Health and Safety in the 'Old Brigade'



Photo courtesy of London Fire Brigade Museum

Some fifty-five years ago I joined the Bristol Fire Brigade and here are some recollections of how 'Health and Safety' regulations have changed. Those long off days often saw firemen entering smoke filled buildings without breathing apparatus, and it would be reasonable to ask why. Well, the Siebe Gorman 'Proto' closed circuit oxygen breathing apparatus (BA) sets could take up to an hour to service after use. This saw a reluctance to use them, particularly on a night shift where the time taken would reduce our 'rest' periods.

So as a young recruit I can distinctly recall being encouraged to emulate what my colleagues reverentially referred to as 'smoke eaters'. These I saw as goliaths of men who could search smoke filled premises using their very own human breathing apparatus, namely their lungs! Thus, we were rightly/wrongly encouraged to tackle fires without the artificial lungs (BA) that took so long to regenerate.

These experiences I would claim gave us an intimate knowledge of self-survival in very basic fire-fighting techniques. Thankfully 'smoke eating' disappeared with the arrival of compressed air sets, which took only minutes to return to operational efficiency after use.



There was also some very basic 'health' advice I was given by Station Officer Frank Elson after tackling a fire without BA. This involved my inhalation of black polymers from a fire damaged television set. On returning to what was then A3 Avonmouth I began to cough up some small particles from the back of the TV; this advice turned out to be to drink a bottle of 'fizzy' lemonade. It had the desired effect and the remaining fragments of TV left my body!

That was BA usage as it was then, however there is another aspect of traditional fire-fighting which deserves recording. This was then described by my Sub Officer at the time Bob Owen as 'pondering time'. Basically, this is where traditionally the first to attend would immediately 'get to work', however the new practice was to stand back for some time and assess (ponder!) the situation. One can only assume that they would not have 'pondered' had there been 'persons reported trapped'!

Despite all the best endeavours of the 'health and safety brigade' I suspect there will always be firefighters/others who will instantly respond to emergencies without hesitation. Here I am reminded of a dictum attributed to the wartime Spitfire ace the late Sir Douglas Bader. Namely: "Rules are written for the obedience of fools and the guidance of wise men." I know that within the Avon Fire & Rescue Service there are plenty of wise men/women and for that we should be thankful.

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